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SIPDIS

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TAGS: [OIIP](#) [PREL](#) [KPAO](#) [BG](#)

SUBJECT: IMAM YAHYA HENDI BUILDS BRIDGES TO BANGLADESHI MUSLIMS

1. Summary: Visiting Bangladesh on the Speakers Program September 22-27, Imam Yahya Hendi addressed thousands of Bangladeshis - from students to ministers -- about Islam in America and the role of women in Islam at mosques, madrassas and other fora. He was exceptionally well received and effective in dispelling common misperceptions about the U.S. End Summary.

2. Hendi lectured on the role of women in Islam at Dhaka University and at events organized by the Bangladesh National Women's Lawyers Association (BNWLA) in Dhaka and Chittagong. He spoke on Islam in America at the Sobhanbagh madrassa and before Friday prayers at the Sobhanbagh mosque in Dhaka; the Harbang Dakhil madrassa and the Chawkaria Imam Association in southern Bangladesh; at a meeting with madrassa students who have received ACCESS micro-scholarships to study English; at Dhaka University; and the Bangladesh Institute of Islamic Thought. He also gave interviews to ATN Bangla, a local television station, and to Jugantor and Naya Diganta newspapers.

3. Hendi traced the history of Islam in America back 700 years, but said that it is only in the last few decades that Muslims have integrated into American life by building institutions. He noted the individual success of many American Muslims and the respect they receive from neighbors and peers. Hendi described common doctrinal themes that Islam shares with Christianity, Judaism, and even Buddhism, and argued that cooperation with non-Muslims to improve society is consistent with Islamic history and theology.

4. Hendi forcefully explained that Islam empowers women. He cited Islamic history and theology to demonstrate that women have an important and respected role within Islam, and that historical practice shows that the Koran and the hadiths should be interpreted in a contemporary context. Women activists thanked him for giving them authoritative backing for their similar arguments on these points. After his meeting with the Access students, 14 girls stayed for another hour to discuss issues like whether Islam required them to cover their faces. Hendi noted that face-covering is a cultural, not religious, issue, and that some, but not all, of the Prophet Muhammad's wives covered their faces.

5. Hendi praised Bangladesh's social and economic development since independence in 1971, noting, for example, that both the Prime Minister and leader of the opposition here are women. He also spoke out against extremism, saying that Islam is a freely chosen faith that cannot be forced on anyone.

6. His varied audiences raised the situation in Iraq and Afghanistan; the widespread urban legend here that no Jews died in the 9/11 attacks and that therefore the attacks must have been a Jewish conspiracy; discrimination against Muslims in America; and the suggestion that Hurricane Katrina might be divine retribution against the U.S.

7. In response, Hendi noted the overwhelming evidence that Osama Bin Laden was behind the 9/11 attacks and that they killed people of all faiths, and that the war in Afghanistan was a justified response. He recalled that he had personally attended the funerals of five Jews who died on September 11. Regarding discrimination, Hendi stated that both he and his hijab-wearing wife find American society open to all people. He acknowledged isolated problems, but explained that harassment is not tolerated by society in general. He described Hurricane Katrina as a natural disaster, and pointed out that last December many Muslims were also victims of a natural disaster when the Asian tsunami occurred.

8. Hendi's credibility was greatly enhanced by his knowledge of Arabic, the Koran, and Islamic history. He was warmly and respectfully received by all audiences. At the Sobhanbagh Mosque, his audience of up to 3,000 persons spilled out on to the street, where they listened by loudspeaker, and included at least six cabinet ministers and ten very senior civil servants. The mosque's imam, who had reluctantly agreed to Hendi's appearance, subsequently told him that although he had previously considered America to be his enemy, he had learned from Hendi and would note this in his sermons in the weeks to come.

Chammas